

Pettus (York Observer story- January 24, 1997)
CATAWBA FALLS JUNKET

On June 10, 1907 the Engineers Society of the Carolinas met in Charlotte for their annual convention. The first day began with a rail trip to Great Falls in Chester County, S. C.

Southern Power Company engineers, led by William States Lee, had a special car leaving at 5:25 a.m. Making their way through Fort Mill, Rock Hill and Chester the train stopped at Fort Lawn in Chester county. The next 11 miles were covered on a rail line owned by Southern Power.

The junketeers (as such travelers were called in that time) were taken to a dam located in the middle of Mountain Island. There, the engineers saw how the river that formerly had two prongs had been dammed on one side so that all of the water was forced through the other channel. This channel used the same river prong as the old state canal that had been designed by Robert Mills in the 1820s, but was now much enlarged.

The crowd got out to inspect the power house, a four-story brick building constructed in a gulch so deep that only the top of the building was visible. The dam was 650 feet long and 10 feet wide. The depth was 105 feet.

Thoroughly impressed, the men boarded the train again and moved a mile for breakfast. One of the engineers later recalled that they approached an abandoned house with a "rude sign which read: 'Life Saving Station.'" He assumed that the old building had been used as a medical station during the construction of the dam. But when he saw tubs of iced beer, hoops of cheese and piles of crackers, he realized that the lives saved would be those of the hungry engineers, most of whom had not had any breakfast. The hosts, thinking of every detail, had also stationed servants around the tables waving green branches to keep off the flies.

Next, the men inspected the generators. There were eight, four on each side. The generators were each capable of generating 5,000 horse power. There were two "tremendous exciters" and a number of "great transformers." The engineers were learning a new language and becoming aware that the future held a place for electrical engineers.

W. A. Leland, first assistant to W. S. Lee, told the group that "We are not on as large a scale as Niagara, but we are more modern. We have appliances and improvements that Niagara hasn't got." He also pointed out that the Catawba Falls plant would require only a half dozen men to run it.

And then the engineers were shown an even larger work in progress. Three miles below the plant they had just toured, there was a temporary suspension bridge across the river. A hundred yards below the bridge was a coffer dam and below that a line of rock piers. The rock piers would support a railroad trestle which was half way across the river.

There was a large machine shop and a brass foundry. Great derricks were lifting huge boulders from the river bed, making space for the foundation of a new, and much larger, dam. Steam drills were hard at work.

The whole project would cost between 2 and 3 million dollars. The new plant was expected to generate 100,000 electrical horse power. And, the expectation was that more textile mills would gravitate to the Catawba river from New England.

Following inspection, the engineers boarded the train. According to one, they were so hungry that they could have eaten "sheaf oats and fodder." To their surprise, it was not far to a sumptuous meal at a fine hotel that had been built years before to house numerous visitors who came to view the "Great Falls of the Catawba."

Until tamed by Southern Power Co., the roar of the falls made the loudest noise of anything in South Carolina.